

How England Was Revived in the 18th Century

by J.C. Ryle

The great change in England during the 18th century was brought about by a few individual reformers who preached the gospel with fervor and simplicity, emphasizing the sufficiency and supremacy of Holy Scripture and the necessity of heart conversion and new creation by the Holy Spirit.

Scripture: Romans 10:14, 2 Timothy 4:2

Topics: "Preaching The Gospel", "Revival"

Description

J.C. Ryle emphasizes the profound transformation that occurred in England during the 18th century, attributing this revival not to government or established churches, but to a few dedicated clergymen who preached with fervor and simplicity. These evangelists, driven by a divine calling, spread the gospel in various settings, reaching the hearts of many and igniting a spiritual awakening across the nation. Their teachings centered on the authority of Scripture, the total depravity of man, the necessity of faith, and the atoning sacrifice of Christ, which resonated deeply with the people. Ryle highlights that the revival was marked by a return to fundamental Christian truths, which ultimately led to a significant moral and religious reformation in society. The impact of their preaching was profound, as it not only transformed individual lives but also reshaped the cultural landscape of England.

Transcript

That a great change for the better came over England during the 18th century is a fact that I suppose no well-informed person would ever attempt to deny. You might as well attempt to deny that there was a Protestant Reformation in the days of Luther, a Long Parliament in the time of Cromwell, or a French Republic at the end of the 18th century. There was a vast change for the better. Both in religion and in morality, the country gradually went through a complete revolution. This is a great fact that even the irreligious cannot deny, however they may attempt to explain it.

But by what means was this great change effected? To whom are we indebted for the immense improvement in religion and morality that undoubtedly came over the land? Who, in a word, were the instruments whom God employed in bringing about the great English reformation of the 18th century?

The government of the country can lay no claim to the credit for the change. Morality cannot be called into being by laws and statutes. People have never yet been made religious by acts of government. In fact, the parliaments and administrations of the 18th century did as little for religion and morality as any that ever existed in England.

Nor did the change come from the Church of England as a body. The leaders of that venerable institution were utterly unequal to the times. Left to herself, the Church of England would probably have died of pride and inactivity.

Nor did the change come from the independent churches of the dissenters. Content with their recently won freedoms, that worthy body of men seemed to rest upon their oars. In the general enjoyment of their new rights of conscience, they forgot the vital principles of their forefathers as well as their own duties and responsibilities.

Who, then, were the reformers of the 18th century? To whom are we indebted, under God, for the change that took place?

The men who wrought deliverance at this period were a few individuals, most of them clergymen of the Established Church, men whose hearts God touched about the same time in various parts of the country. They were not wealthy or highly connected. They had neither money to buy adherents nor family influence to command attention and respect. They were not put forward by any church, party, society, or institution. They were simply men whom God stirred up and brought out to do His work without previous concert, scheme, or plan.

They did Christ's work in the old apostolic way by becoming the evangelists of their day. They taught one set of truths. They taught them in the same way, with fire, reality, and earnestness. They taught them in the same spirit, always loving, compassionate, and like Paul, even weeping, but always bold, unflinching, and not fearing the face of man. They did not wait for sinners to come to them, but rather they sought sinners. Instead of sitting idle until sinners offered to repent, they assaulted the high places of ungodliness like men storming a breach, giving sinners no rest so long as they held to their sins.

The movement of these gallant evangelists shook England from one end to another. From the beginning, people in high places made it known that they despised them. The educated class sneered at them as fanatics. The humorists made jokes and invented sarcastic names for them. The Church of England shut her doors on them, and even the dissenters turned the cold shoulder on them. The ignorant mob persecuted them. But the movement of these few evangelists went on and made itself felt in every part of the land.

Many were aroused and awakened to think about religion. Many were shamed out of their sins. Many became frightened at their own ungodliness. Many were converted. Many who declared their dislike of the movement were secretly provoked to imitation. The little sapling became a strong tree; the little creek became a deep, broad stream; and the little spark became a steady, burning flame. A candle was lighted of which we are now enjoying the benefit.

The feeling of all classes in the land about religion and morality gradually assumed a totally different complexion. And all this, under God, was effected by a few unpatronized, unpaid adventurers! When God takes a work in hand, nothing can stop it. When God is for us, none can be against us.

The Sword of Preaching

The instrumentality by which the spiritual reformers of the 18th century carried on their operations was of the simplest description. It was neither more nor less than the old apostolic weapon of preaching. The sword that Paul wielded with such mighty effect when he assaulted the strongholds of heathenism 1,800

years ago was the same sword by which they won their victories.

To say, as some have done, that they neglected education and schools is totally incorrect. Wherever they gathered congregations, they cared for the children. To say, as others have done, that they neglected the sacraments is simply false. Those who make these assertions only expose their entire ignorance of the religious history of that period. But beyond a doubt, preaching was their favorite weapon. They wisely went back to first principles and took up apostolic plans. They held, with Paul, that a minister's first work is to preach the gospel.

They preached everywhere. If the pulpit of a parish church was open to them, they gladly availed themselves of it. If it could not be obtained, they were equally ready to preach in a barn. No place was too unworthy for them. In the field or by the roadside, on the village grass or in a marketplace, in lanes or in alleys, in cellars or in attics, on a tub or on a table, on a bench or on a horse block, wherever hearers could be gathered, the spiritual reformers of the 18th century were ready to speak to them about their souls. They were instant in season and out of season in doing Christ's work, and crossed sea and land in carrying forward their Father's business. Now, all this was a new thing. Can we wonder that it produced a great effect?

They preached simply. They rightly concluded that the very first qualification to be aimed at in a sermon is to be understood. They saw clearly that thousands of able and well composed sermons are utterly useless because they are above the heads of the hearers. They strove to come down to the level of the people and to speak what the poor could understand.

To attain this, they were not ashamed to sacrifice their reputations as learned men. They willingly used illustrations and anecdotes in abundance and, like Jesus their Master, borrowed lessons from every object in nature. They carried out the maxim of Augustine, "A wooden key is not so beautiful as a golden one, but if it can open the door when the golden one cannot, it is far more useful."

They revived the style of sermons in which Luther and Latimer were so eminently successful. In short, they saw the truth of what the great German Reformer meant when he said, "No one can be a good preacher to the people who is not willing to preach in a manner that seems childish and vulgar to some." Now, all this again was quite new in their age.

They preached fervently and directly. They cast aside that dull, cold, lifeless mode of delivery that had long made sermons boring. They proclaimed the words of faith with faith, and the story of life with life. They spoke with fiery zeal, like men who were thoroughly persuaded that what they said was true and that it was of the utmost importance to your eternal interest to hear it.

They spoke like men who had a message from God for you, who felt that they must deliver it, and that they must have your attention while they delivered it. They threw heart, soul, and feeling into their sermons, and they sent their hearers home convinced that the preacher was sincere and wished them well. They believed that you must speak from the heart if you wish to speak to the heart, and that there must be unmistakable faith and conviction within the pulpit if there is to be faith and conviction among the pews. All this was a thing that had become almost obsolete. Can we wonder that it took people by storm and produced an immense effect?

The Substance of Preaching

But what was the substance and subject matter of the preaching that produced such wonderful effect in the 18th century? I will not insult my readers' common sense by only saying that it was simple, earnest, fervent, real, genial, brave, lifelike, and so forth. I would have it understood that it was eminently doctrinal and distinct. The strongholds of that century's sins would never have been cast down by mere earnestness and negative teaching. The trumpets that blew down the walls of Jericho were trumpets that gave no uncertain sound. The English evangelists of the 18th century were not men of an uncertain creed. But what was it they proclaimed? A little information on this point may be useful.

For one thing, the spiritual reformers of the 18th century taught constantly the sufficiency and supremacy of Holy Scripture. The Bible, whole and unmutated, was their sole rule of faith and practice. They accepted all its statements without question or dispute. They knew nothing of any part of Scripture being uninspired. They never flinched from asserting that there can be no error in the Word of God, and that when we cannot understand or reconcile some part of its contents, the fault is in the interpreter and not in the text. In all their preaching they were eminently men of one book. To that book they were content to pin their faith, and by it to stand or fall. This was one grand characteristic of their preaching. They honored, loved, and revered the Bible.

Furthermore, the reformers of the 18th century constantly taught the total corruption of human nature. They knew nothing of the modern notion that Christ is in every man, and that all possess something good within that they have only to stir up and use in order to be saved. They never flattered men and women in this fashion. They told them plainly that they were spiritually dead and must be made alive again, that they were guilty, lost, helpless, hopeless, and in imminent danger of eternal ruin. Strange as it may seem to some, their first step toward making men good was to show them that they were utterly bad, and their primary argument in persuading men to do something for their souls was to convince them that they could do nothing at all.

Furthermore, the reformers of the 18th century taught constantly that Christ's death upon the cross was the only satisfaction for man's sin, and that Christ died as our substitute, the just for the unjust. This, in fact, was the cardinal point in almost all their sermons. They never taught the modern doctrine that Christ's death was only a great example of self-sacrifice. They saw in it something far greater and deeper than that--they saw in it the payment of man's mighty debt to God. They loved Christ's person, they rejoiced in Christ's promises, and they urged men to walk after Christ's example. But the one subject concerning Christ that they delighted to dwell on above all others was the atoning blood that Christ shed for us on the cross.

Furthermore, the reformers of the 18th century constantly taught the great doctrine of justification by faith. They told men that faith was the one thing needful in order to obtain an interest in Christ's work for their souls. They declared that before we believe, we are spiritually dead and have no interest in Christ, but that the moment we do believe, we live and are entitled to all Christ's benefits. Justification by virtue of church membership--justification without believing or trusting--were notions to which they gave no merit. Everything if you will believe, and nothing if you do not believe: this was the very marrow of their preaching.

Furthermore, the reformers of the 18th century constantly taught the universal necessity of heart conversion and new creation by the Holy Spirit. They proclaimed everywhere to the crowds whom they addressed, "You must be born again." Sonship to God by baptism or while continuing to do the will of the devil they never admitted. The regeneration they preached was no dormant, motionless thing. It was

something that could be seen, discerned, and known by its effects.

Furthermore, the reformers of the 18th century taught constantly the inseparable connection between true faith and personal holiness. They never allowed for a moment that any church membership or religious profession was the least proof of a man being a true Christian if he lived an ungodly life. A true Christian, they maintained, must always be known by his fruits, and these fruits must be plainly manifest and unmistakable in all aspects of life. "No fruits, no grace" was the constant tenor of their preaching.

Finally, the reformers of the 18th century constantly taught as doctrines equally true God's eternal hatred against sin and God's love toward sinners. They knew nothing of a heaven where the holy and unholy are both able to find admission. With respect to heaven and hell, they used the utmost plainness of speech. They never shrank from declaring in plain terms the certainty of God's judgment and wrath to come if men persisted in impenitence and unbelief, and yet they never ceased to magnify the riches of God's kindness and compassion, and to entreat all sinners to repent and turn to God before it was too late.

Such were the main truths that the English evangelists of those times were constantly preaching. These were the principal doctrines they were always proclaiming, whether in town or in the country, whether in church or in the open air, whether among the rich or among the poor. These were the doctrines by which they turned England upside down, made farmers weep until their dirty faces were streamed with tears, arrested the attention of peers and philosophers, stormed the strongholds of Satan, plucked thousands like brands from the burning, and altered the character of the age.

Call them simple and elementary doctrines, if you will. Say, if you please, that you see nothing grand, striking, new, or peculiar about this list of truths. But the fact is undeniable that God blessed these truths to the reformation of England. What God has blessed, man ought never to despise.

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